



U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service

Proposed Deepening of the Savannah Harbor

Savannah National Wildlife Refuge

The Savannah National Wildlife Refuge is one of the nation's wetland treasures. Managed by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service as part of the National Wildlife Refuge System, the refuge complex is visited by almost 600,000 people annually.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is concerned about a Georgia Ports Authority proposal to deepen the Savannah Harbor from 42 feet to 48 feet. This proposal would have serious negative impacts to the Savannah National Wildlife Refuge, to aquatic species reliant on the Savannah River, and to the coastal fishing and tourism economy.

Impact to Savannah National Wildlife Refuge

When the 27,000 acre Savannah National Wildlife Refuge was established in 1927, it contained over 6,000 acres of tidal freshwater marsh. This ecosystem is critical to the valuable Savannah River estuary. The future of sport fishing, commercial fishing, and tourism in Savannah rely on this environment. Past harbor deepening activities have caused the loss of 53% (3,200 acres) of the refuge's tidal freshwater marsh. The deepening proposal will degrade 42% of the remaining tidal freshwater marsh. The proposed harbor deepening would also destroy refuge lands for the proposed channel realignment and enlargement of a turning basin.

Impact to Aquatic Species in the Savannah River

Savannah's economy was at one time highly dependent on the \$100 million Atlantic striped bass fishery and a prized shortnose sturgeon caviar market. Today, the shortnose sturgeon is endangered and the striped bass is declining rapidly, due mostly to past harbor deepening activities within Georgia and South Carolina.

The Fish and Wildlife Service is working to restore these fishery resources to harvestable and economically profitable levels. However, the proposed harbor deepening project would further destroy spawning habitat and alter river conditions needed for reproduction of these fish species. This project could eliminate the shortnose sturgeon from the Savannah River.

The 1999 Water Resources Development Act was recently approved and included conditional authorization of the Savannah Harbor Project. The Fish and Wildlife Service will return to the Stakeholders Evaluation Group to provide input on analysis and selection of the least environmentally damaging alternative for the proposed project and preparation of the Tier II Environmental Impact Statement. This includes consideration of the alternative of no deepening. Additional scientific research that the Service recommended for completion by the Georgia Ports Authority is scheduled to be funded by June 15, 2000.

The Savannah Harbor Expansion is authorized at a total cost of \$230,174,000. A portion of this amount is authorized for implementation of a mitigation plan. The project may be carried out only after the Secretary of the Army, in consultation with affected Federal, State of Georgia, State of South Carolina, regional and local entities, reviews and approves an Environmental Impact Statement for the project. The EIS must include: an analysis of impacts of project depth alternatives ranging from 42 feet through 48 feet; a selected plan for navigation and an associated mitigation plan; approval and a determination that the selected plan and the mitigation plan adequately addresses the potential environmental impacts of the project; and implementation of the mitigation plan before or concurrently with construction of the project.

On October 21, 1999, the Chief of Engineers filed a favorable report on the project. The Southern Environmental Law Center filed a lawsuit against the Corps of Engineers on March 16, 2000 for premature approval of the Savannah harbor deepening project.

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Savannah Harbor

Environmental Impacts of The Harbor Deepening Proposal

Proper Environmental Review of Project Required

For more information contact